



Russian agents could help control dangerous Giant Hogweed

Fungi imported from the Caucasus in Russia could help to control the dangerous invasive weed Giant Hogweed, according to initial research results announced by CABI Bioscience at the Royal Show today (29 June 2003).

Speaking at the launch of the organisation's Invasive Species Management (ISM) service, CABI Bioscience plant pathologist Dr Marion Seier, explained that three fungal species from the weed's place of origin in Russia had been identified that could be used as biological agents to help in its control.



"Biological control uses the natural enemies of invasive alien weeds, like fungi or insects, to control these plants," said Dr Seier. "This strategy has been used with great success in other countries, but it has not yet been tried against weeds in Europe.

"We are investigating the potential for the biological control of Giant Hogweed as part of a three-year research programme involving several European partners. This multidisciplinary project called Giant Alien is funded by the European Commission under the 5th Framework programme 'Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development (EESD)."

The aim of the project is to develop an integrated strategy for the management of Giant Hogweed in Europe, as it is likely that other methods would have to be used alongside biological control techniques.

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"The up to 5 metre high Giant Hogweed plant is having a detrimental impact on biodiversity across Europe and poses a serious threat to riverside habitats in the UK," reported Dr Seier.

"It is also dangerous for humans as its sap can cause severe blistering and potentially permanent scarring. It is now illegal to grow the plant in the UK."

Dr Seier and colleagues have been working on the project for around 18 months and initial results have identified three fungal pathogens that could be used as biological control agents. These are *Phloeospora heraclei*, *Septoria heracleicola* and *Ramulariopsis* sp. nov..

"None of the three species has been recorded on Giant Hogweed before," enthused Dr Seier. "And the genus *Ramulariopsis* has never been reported on any plant in the same family as Giant Hogweed. The results are encouraging because at the start of this project, virtually no records existed documenting the presence of natural fungal enemies of this plant in its native surroundings."

"However a great deal more work needs to be done before we can be certain that these fungi are specific to Giant Hogweed – which they would need to be if they were ever to be released at some future date," she pointed out. "But the fungi we have identified do at least indicate some potential for the biological control of Giant Hogweed and we will be back in the Caucasus next month to carry out further research. A collaborating team of entomologists is assessing the biological control potential of natural insect enemies."

Biological control research is one of many areas of expertise offered by CABI Bioscience's new ISM service, which brings together the organisation's experience in this field to meet the challenge posed by invasive species in the 21st century.

"Invasive alien species represent the greatest threat to the preservation of global biodiversity after habitat destruction," said CABI Bioscience managing director David Dent. "The World Conservation Union estimates the global cost of invasives at US \$400 billion per year in damage, lost yields and control measures. And with climate change, poor quarantine infrastructure and increasing international movements of goods and people, the problem is getting worse."

“ISM has been tailored to enable countries to cope with this serious issue. It offers assessments of a particular problem, along with leading edge prevention and control strategies, and advice on both national and regional capacity-building.

“The service draws on our world leading expertise in the natural or biological control of invasive alien species. CABI Bioscience has 90 years' experience in the identification, prevention and control of non-native species in many different countries. The use of natural enemies for controlling invasive species is an option that has been used with success all over the world. ISM will prove to be an important weapon in the global fight against this growing problem.”

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Editor's Notes

Further information on the Giant Alien project can be found on the following website:
www.flec.kvl.dk/giant-alien/

Further information on ISM can be found on the following website:
www.invasivespeciesmanagement.org